

APRIL 16, 1976

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: THE MAGNA CARTA

ANNCR: DURING THIS BI-CENTENNIAL YEAR, WASHINGTON IS THE RECIPIENT OF A NUMBER OF HANDSOME GIFTS FROM ABROAD. FEW MATCH IN SIGNIFICANCE THAT OF GREAT BRITAIN, ABOUT WHICH WE HEAR MORE NOW FROM VOA'S ANITA CHAPMAN:

VOICE: BRITAIN'S GIFT IS THE LOAN, DURING THE SECOND HALF OF AMERICA'S BI-CENTENNIAL YEAR, OF ONE OF FOUR REMAINING COPIES OF THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT DOCUMENT IT POSSESSES: THE MAGNA CARTA. IT IS A FITTING GESTURE. FOR WHILE THE NEW-WORLD COLONY REVOLTED AND WON INDEPENDENCE FROM THE MOTHER COUNTRY, IT CONTINUED THE TRADITION OF BRITISH LAW EMBODIED IN MAGNA CARTA AND BROUGHT HERE BY THE PREDOMINANTLY ENGLISH SETTLERS.

MAGNA CARTA IS THE LATIN FOR "GREAT CHARTER." THE NAME GOES BACK MORE THAN SEVEN CENTURIES TO THE DAYS OF JUNE IN TWELVE FIFTEEN, WHEN A PARTICULARLY RAPACIOUS ENGLISH KING FOUND HIMSELF FACED WITH ARMED REVOLT BY HIS NOBLES UNLESS HE AGREED TO LIMITATIONS ON HIS POWER.

THERE WAS ALREADY A TRADITION, DATING TO THE SON OF WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR A CENTURY EARLIER, OF THE KING PUTTING HIS SEAL ON A CHARTER THAT PROMISED GOOD GOVERNMENT TO THE NOBLES. THESE, SEALED ON ACCESSION TO THE THRONE, WERE CALLED CORONATION CHARTERS. THEIR APPLICATION VARIED WITH THE KING. BY THE TIME OF JOHN, WHOSE SEAL WAS AFFIXED TO THE MAGNA CARTA, CONDITIONS BETWEEN NOBLEMEN AND THE ROYAL COURT WERE SEVERELY STRAINED. IN THE END, THEY BANDED AGAINST HIM.

A DETERMINED MINORITY MET IN THE CHAPEL AT BURY ST. EDMUND TO DRAW UP STATUTES TO PROTECT FREE MEN AGAINST ROYAL POWER. THEY ALSO MADE THE CRUCIAL MOVE OF OCCUPYING LONDON. KING JOHN WAS FORCED TO

ACCEDE, AND ON JUNE FIFTEENTH MET HIS NOBLES ON THE FIELD OF RUNNYMEDE NEAR THE ROYAL PALACE OF WINDSOR, TO PUT HIS SEAL ON THE MAGNA CARTA.

WHY IS THIS DOCUMENT SO REVERED IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD? BECAUSE SINCE RUNNYMEDE ITS STATUTES HAVE BEEN THE BASIS OF LAW, THE STANDARD OF THOSE SEEKING REDRESS FROM AUTHORITY. IF A SUN OF EMPIRE STILL SHINES, IT IS THROUGH TRANSMISSION OF SUCH CONCEPTS TO COLONIZED LANDS. RUNNYMEDE HAS SHAPED THE THINKING OF COUNTLESS GREAT MINDS, INCLUDING THE VIRGINIA COLONIST THOMAS JEFFERSON.

THE MAGNA CARTA IS NOT A CODE OF LAW, IT SPEAKS IN GENERAL PRINCIPLES -- NO DOUBT THE REASON FOR ITS LASTING INFLUENCE. SOME FEEL ITS TONE WAS GIVEN BY THE LEGAL-MINDED ARCHBISHOP, STEPHEN LANGTON, WHO IN TWELVE FIFTEEN DIRECTED THE UNREST OF THE BARONS AWAY FROM SPECIFIC GRIEVANCES TO THE DEMAND FOR A SOLEMN GRANT OF LIBERTY.

THE MAGNA CARTA WAS READ PUBLICLY OVER THE YEARS IN EVERY SHIRE OF THE REALM, THUS LEADING EACH TO SEE IN IT THE (WEAPON) OF HIS OWN PROTECTION, AND PROVIDING THE COMMON SPEECH WITH MEMORABLE PHRASES: JUDGMENT BY ONE'S PEERS, DUE PROCESS OF LAW.

A GROUP OF AMERICAN CONGRESSMEN WILL TRAVEL TO BRITAIN IN JUNE OF THIS YEAR, TO TAKE SOLEMN POSSESSION OF THIS SCROLL PENNED IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES. THEY WILL BRING IT TO WASHINGTON WHERE FOR THE REMAINDER OF NINETEEN SEVENTY-SIX MILLIONS OF AMERICANS WILL FOR THE FIRST TIME SEE THE DOCUMENT THAT CENTURIES AGO CAST ITS SHADOW ON THEIR LIVES. THOSE OLD ENOUGH MAY REMEMBER NINETEEN SIXTY-THREE. IN THAT YEAR, THE BRITISH, SEARCHING AMONG THEIR TREASURES

FOR A WAY TO HONOR AN ASSASSINATED YOUNG PRESIDENT, CHOSE A HALF
HECTARE OF THE HALLOWED MEADOW OF RUNNymeDE TO BE NAMED IN MEMORY
OF JOHN F. KENNEDY.

NOW GREAT BRITAIN HAS MADE ANOTHER GRACEFUL GESTURE, IN SHARING THE
MAGNA CARTA WITH US.

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